



King County Mental Health Chemical Abuse and Dependency Services Division 2002 Briefing Paper

OMBUDSMAN SERVICES

BACKGROUND:

In 1993, when the State's Federal Medicaid Waiver was approved and instituted as part of the State contract with the Regional Support Networks (and later with the Prepaid Health Plans), came the requirement to each RSN to establish an independent mental health ombuds service for clients. The service was required to have consumers or family members functioning as ombudsman, and to be accessible to all clients of public mental health services in the county. King County released a Request for Proposal and selected an agency, a consumer-owned sole proprietorship, to provide those services. That agency, operating under a county contract, enjoys a level of independence that is unique in Washington State, but that is exactly the level of independence that the contract and the State WAC define. The 2002 Ombuds contract is \$67,787, plus office and supply support from the County.

The Mental Health Ombuds Service provides assistance to clients of King County mental health services and their family members who may need help in dispute resolution following a complaint or grievance. Eligible persons for these services include: all Medicaid eligible recipients in King County who are receiving publicly funded mental health services or, in the case of a child, a parent or family member of a service recipient; a Medicaid enrolled person who may wish to receive publicly funded mental health services; all non-Medicaid residents of King County who are receiving publicly funded mental health services; or a financially and clinically eligible resident who may wish to receive publicly funded mental health services.

ISSUES/CHALLENGES:

The principle challenge is preserving a local, independent and accessible service, staffed with peer counselors who know the King County network. King County opposes legislation to centralize ombudsman services at the state level. Consumers need a convenient place where they can call, write, and/or visit to discuss their individual complaint or grievance. The business must be adequately staffed to ensure the service can act on client requests Monday through Friday during regular business hours, as well as other times as necessary. The King County Ombuds Service staff participates in the RSN system to ensure that the county and its subcontractors develop and maintain a well functioning, accountable grievance process. Ombuds staff frequently attends planning, coordination, and quality management meetings, as well as Mental Health Board meetings and also conduct regular on site visits for staff and consumers at provider agencies.

DATA:

In 2001, the King County Mental Health Ombuds Service logged 2,686 phone calls: 337 for information and referral; 511 for informal support and/or complaints handled at the case manager level; and 1,838 calls for formal complaint investigation and follow-up. In 2001, there were 84 formal written complaints filed. The preferred consumer method of contact breaks down to 33% in person, 50% by phone, and 17% by mail.

RECOMMENDATION/LEGISLATIVE ACTION:

Maintain the locally managed, easily accessible, accountable, and cost-effective King County Ombuds Service under contract with King County to ensure these important services are available locally to clients and family members. Maintain the local knowledge and expertise of those staff and the availability of those staff to work with providers and the RSN for system change.